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ABSTRACT

To identify and help alleviate the apprehensions of returning adult students at the University of Illinois at Chicago, 42 subjects were given the Miller and Daly Writing Apprehension Test (WAT) before and after a composition course, their grades were recorded, and their teachers completed questionnaires regarding student attitudes and performance. In addition, four volunteer case study subjects participated in interviews and submitted written drafts of papers. It was discovered that the level of apprehension determined by the WAT did not necessarily correspond to a student's success in the class, and the initial widespread anxiety reported by teachers and interview data did not indicate dysfunctional anxiety in performance. Factors that promoted anxiety were found to be (1) new writing tasks, (2) conspicuousness in a class of younger students, (3) uncertainty about class procedures, (4) memories of past difficulties or rigid prescriptions about good writing, and (5) the anticipation of high evaluation. Other factors affecting anxiety levels included higher perception of future ramifications and authority conflict. While anxiety levels were indicated as high, it was shown that a sympathetic teacher can help students achieve success. (CRH)

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"Treading Softly": Dealing with the Apprehensions of Older Freshman Writers

It was a still-warm September morning, as I rode the Halsted bus to campus. All summer, I, along with a small committee of others, had been planning a special orientation program for returning adults, that is, new freshmen and transfers twenty-five and older. Like other universities in the Chicago area, the University of Illinois at Chicago offers evening courses for the convenience of returning students, but unlike some universities, U.I.C. does not offer special re-entry programs. Thus this event was something of an experiment.

Suited up in a new outfit, carefully assembled handouts in my briefcase, I felt that pleasant sense of confidence that comes from being well prepared. I had planned my writing anxiety workshop, one of four concurrent sessions, as one always should, with a particular audience in mind. Specifically, I expected an audience of mostly inexperienced, basic writers, not an entirely unreasonable assumption given the suggestion in writing apprehension literature that highly anxious writers and basic writers are often one in the same.[1] And to be sure, some of the nervous beginning writers that I had expected were there--Michael, who had dropped out of school in the eighth grade and recently taken the G.E.D. exam; Robert, who had graduated some years ago from an inner-city high school; and Maureen, who was returning after raising

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five children, a task which had allowed her little time for reading and writing.

But also attending were returning adults I had not expected, nervous experienced writers like Martha, who had been an executive secretary for ten years, editing and composing most of her boss's correspondence and writing science fiction on the side; James, who as a doorman for a swanky near-north high-rise spent the idle hours from midnight to eight reading and keeping a journal; and Catharine, who was not even a freshman, but who in fact had an A.B. in English literature from Vassar and was returning for undergraduate coursework in Japanese prior to applying to the Oriental studies program at the University of Chicago. I'm still puzzled by her attendance. But as the round of introductions circled back to me, the confidence I felt on my morning bus ride was shattered, and I was nervously perspiring into my new suit, certain that I was the most apprehensive person there. How could my modest set of exercises possibly address the apprehensions of such a widely diverse group? The time constraint which had seemed so limiting beforehand, now seemed a godsend.

But thanks to the congeniality and openness typical of returning adults, the session went rather well. The point of this story is not, however, to detail that session, at least not yet, but rather to introduce other surprises which followed. To investigate these varying expressions of anxiety further, I collected data on these and other returning adult writers throughout the fall quarter. At the beginning and end of the quarter, I distributed Miller and Daly's Writing

Apprehension Test to those returning adults enrolled in one of the three courses in the freshman sequence. I also checked the grade outcomes at the end of the term and distributed a questionnaire to composition teachers asking for their impressions of these students' attitudes and performance. With four volunteer case study subjects, I conducted interviews and collected written drafts. Although my sample was small, forty-two to be exact, the results to date are worth sharing.

What I discovered were several apparent anomalies. First, the level of apprehension as determined by the W.A.T. scores did not necessarily correspond with the students' success in freshman composition. There were, in fact, the same number of A's among the one-third with the highest W.A.T. scores as there were among the one-third with the lowest W.A.T. scores. Of the twelve scoring above seventy-five, a score considered a probable indication of high apprehension,[2] seven earned an A or B, while the other five received D's, F's, or withdrew from the course. In other words, those in the high apprehensive group either did very well or very poorly.

A second anomaly was that although teachers reported widespread initial anxiety, and interview data and attendance at the workshop indicated such, neither the initial W.A.T. group mean nor the group's actual performance in freshman composition indicated high or dysfunctional anxiety. The overall W.A.T. mean among returning adults taking composition at U.I.C. this fall was only sixty-five, about ten points lower than the general mean reported in many of Daly's studies.[3] And consistent with these moderate to low W.A.T. scores was the group's

success rate in freshman composition--thirty-two A's and B's out of forty-two students. A third surprise was that though some moderate and low apprehensives had higher W.A.T. scores at the end of the term, this seemed to have had no bearing on grades--of the eight whose W.A.T. scores increased by ten or more points, six received an A or B.

Clearly, most of the returning adults in my sample were or quickly became competent writers if grades are an accurate measure of competence. No doubt this unusually large proportion of competent returning adult writers is due to the institutional context. Returning adults who are highly apprehensive about the return to school and who seriously question their preparedness tend to begin at area community colleges, often transferring later to U.I.C.. But why, then, did so many of these competent writers perceive themselves as highly anxious, and why did some of their initial W.A.T. scores predict dysfunctional levels of apprehension?

Two explanations seem reasonable: 1) the initial anxiety expressed by many of the returning students in my sample was situational, not dispositional anxiety; and 2) the high motivation reported by their teachers counterbalanced this situational anxiety.

In Daly and Hailey's 1980 NCTE talk recently published in New Directions in Composition Research, "Putting the Situation into Writing Research: Situational Parameters of Writing Apprehension," they make a useful distinction between dispositional and situational anxiety, describing the former as a "trait-like," stable individual difference and the latter as "transitory in nature" and dependent on the particular characteristics of the writing situation.[4] Although some in my sample were

dispositionally anxious, scoring high on the W.A.T. and performing poorly or dropping out of their composition classes, most were anxious because of the situation. Situational anxiety acted as a wild card in my small study, inflating the W.A.T. scores of some but not all who considered themselves anxious. Since familiarity with the situation lessened or eliminated the initial anxiety, there was little connection between W.A.T. scores and course performance.

The situational anxiety which produced unexpected results also offers an explanation of those results. All of the situational factors named by Daly and Hailey as increasing anxiety exist in the situtation returning adults face: 1) novel writing tasks; 2) possible conspicuousness in classes made up of mainly younger students; 3) uncertainty about requirements, expectations, and grading standards; 4) memories of past difficulties or rigid prescriptions about good writing; and 5) the anticipation of high evaluation. It is no wonder that even those with experience in real-world writing feel initial apprehension about the return to school writing.

To those situational factors just mentioned, I would add two more that contribute to the anxiety level of returning adult writers. For one thing, there is increased situational anxiety because more is at stake for returning adults. In one returning adult's words, "It is my second chance, and I must make it--not only to prove to myself that I can do it, but also because by whole future depends on it."[5] Another factor which adds to the anxiety of many returning adults is the conflict between the authority that comes with adult identity and experience and the

subservience they perceive as expected in the student role.[6] Naomi, the most able of my case study subjects, struggled with this latter issue throughout the quarter. She insisted on an original approach and personal investment in each assignment. "I don't produce something just because it's required" was her terse way of putting it. After receiving an A on her first paper, she received a failing grade on her second, an essay on capital punishment. Rather than an analysis of the stands taken by two essay writers, she had written a strong personal statement explaining her own stand. Naturally, she felt she was being punished for her independent approach to the topic. Although this momentarily shook her confidence, her dogged determination, numerous conferences with her teacher and five rewrites finally resulted in a paper with which both she and her teacher were satisfied. Along the way, she was tempted to produce a perfunctory but satisfactory version just to get the assignment done, but Naomi's sense of authorial integrity was not to be compromised.

This anecdote leads naturally to my second explanation for why these writers performed well in spite of the anxiety they brought to the freshman composition classroom. While having more at stake breeds anxiety, it also breeds high motivation. The willingness to work hard at writing and to persevere as Naomi did even when the task is tedious and time-consuming accounts for the impressive growth seen in many returning adult writers. Nearly all the composition teachers responding to my questionnaire commented on the seriousness of their returning adult writers. Patricia Connors calls it "earnestness" in the Victorian sense

of the word and reports that according to her survey results, returning adults spend an average of one hour longer preparing for each class than do their younger classmates.[7]

Moreover, returning adult writers are motivated because they realize that writing skills are important in a variety of real-life contexts. Not a single returning adult agreed with the item on the W.A.T. which reads, "Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time," and all but two said they expected their future professions to involve writing. "Students with high motivation," says Barry Kroll "and expectations of success tend to perform well in school."[8] Even when that expectation of success is tentative, it seems that high motivation compensates for transitory situational anxiety.

For some, of course, the situational factors only intensify the already existing dispositional anxiety or the even deeper learning anxiety of the sort described Lynn Quitman Troyka in "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980s."[9] Though few, those in my sample who had difficulty in freshman composition also had high W.A.T. scores, suggesting that their apprehension was dispositional. A long-standing view of oneself as a poor writer is slow to change. "I am no writer," insisted one returning student. And as a teacher noted, "It is one thing to change the self-image of an eighteen-year-old beginning writer and quite another to change the self-image of an older student who has been running around for ten years thinking she can't write."[10] But here, too, students' determination coupled with patient classroom teachers can result in gradual changes in attitude and writing growth.

When Michael came to the workshop on writing anxiety, his voice shook when he spoke. Unable to read when he dropped out of school in the eighth grade, he later taught himself to read by plodding through popular novels like those of Stephen King, stopping to look up every fourth or fifth word in the dictionary. His recent success at passing the G.E.D. on the first attempt boosted his self-esteem enough so that he decided to give college a try. But Michael is still tentative about school and seems poised to leave if things begin to threaten his hard-won confidence. On a number of occasions, he has told me, "I know I'm intelligent; I'm just not sure if I am academic." Although he is able to produce only short pieces of disjointed, error-filled prose, he dreams of becoming a professional writer, of seeing his name in print. While this seems a quixotic dream, it fuels his efforts and keeps him working. Encouragement laced with some realistic assessments of the work ahead seems to be resulting in slow progress; he plans to take the developmental course a second time though he is not required to do so, and he seems eager to continue his tutorial work with me in the Writing Center.

Reducing the situational stress will only solve part of the problem for students like Michael who need extensive practice and long-term support and instruction. But for those whose anxiety is temporarily increased by the situation, there is a great deal we can do to ease their return to school writing.

I would like to close with a few suggestions for reducing the situational factors which initially concern returning students.

Many of these ideas will sound familiar, and I am particularly indebted to Lynn Bloom and Merle Thompson, who have described their strategies for reducing writing anxiety at earlier CCCC meetings.[11]

1. Novelty - Although the novelty factor is really only reduced by familiarity and practice, we can alleviate initial concerns by engaging students in no-fault writing practice--freewriting, journal keeping, and writing exercises like the interview exercise I used in my workshop. We can encourage what Donald Murray calls discovery drafts, followed by student-teacher conferences, holding off evaluation as student writers adjust to new writing tasks. A second suggestion is to find out the writing tasks with which students are familiar and note the similarities and differences between these tasks--personal letters, business letters and memos --and school writing tasks. Still other suggestions are to design writing tasks that draw upon adult experience or to provide the information necessary for the writing task (i.e. a statistical chart which students are to analyze in some way). And finally, we can help reduce the novelty factor by offering clear guidelines and models of successful student writing.

2. Conspicuousness - Though returning adults often fear that they will feel conspicuous and out-of-place in a classroom of mostly younger students, they usually become comfortable and quickly earn the respect of the other students because of their maturity and dedication. If anything, the younger students become the ones who are a bit threatened by the high standards set by these older students. This adjustment, however, can be facilitated by creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere which includes maximum student participation and interaction.

3. Ambiguity - Probably one of the most unsettling factors for returning adults is the ambiguity involved in this new venture. In the workshop, I addressed this concern by distributing course descriptions of the three freshman composition courses at U.I.C., by explaining options for taking proficiency tests, and by acquainting them with various support services like the Writing Center. In the classroom, it is important to provide a complete syllabus and clear explanations of assignments and grading standards. Returning students need to be able to plan their work because most have family and work commitments in addition to their school work. Though they want instructors who are approachable and supportive, returning students want the teacher to provide guidance. Since returning adults are investing money and time which is even more precious, they expect courses to be carefully planned.

4. Negative past experiences - Many returning adults bring crippling myths about the writing process and what constitutes good writing. One case study subject had been taught in her parochial high school to perfect each sentence before composing the next. My approach to dispelling these myths at the workshop was to share a few quotations from professional writers and elicit brief writing histories. Both at the workshop and in the classroom setting, I have found that these strategies can have dramatic results in relieving tension and activating student potential. The student just mentioned became, as the quarter progressed, a competent and even enthusiastic writer as she began to brainstorm, draft and redraft before she worried about correctness.

5. High evaluation - Understandably returning adults feel threatened by evaluation, all writers do, but these students bring memories of papers riddled with red ink and fears that previously learned skills and knowledge are rusty or lost. As mentioned earlier, delaying the grade until the student has had a chance to revise, offering feedback before evaluation, or having students produce a portfolio of work, selecting themselves the work to be evaluated, all help reduce this concern. It is also important to involve students in the evaluation process, both in evaluating peers' texts and their own texts. Since, however, it is usually the teacher who gives the final grade, she or he must be as clear as possible about grading criteria.

6. High investment - For the most part, having more at stake is a positive concern which results in high motivation; however, some students become so anxious about performing well that they block, overwrite, or make too big a project out of particular assignments. While this is the opposite of the problem we experience with many younger students and we do want to encourage maximum effort, we need to help those students whose perfectionism hinders their writing progress. Helping students set manageable goals, a reasonable timetable, and realistic expectations can counteract some of this overzealousness.

7. Authority conflict - Allowing as much control as possible over topic choices and approaches to assignments helps to reduce the conflict between adult identity and the student role. And earlier suggestions about involving students in evaluation of their own and other students' texts offer ways to make teachers' evaluations seem less authoritarian and arbitrary.

In the CCC article by Lynn Quitman Troyka which inspired my workshop and this talk, she paraphrases Yeats, saying we must "tread softly" in teaching composition to returning adults and other nontraditional students for we tread on their dreams.[12] These dreams of a second chance, of seeing one's name in print, of escaping from menial jobs that go nowhere are held tentatively because these students fear the university will evaluate them and find them wanting. For many, success in freshman composition is a litmus test, an indicator of whether or not they will make it as college students. We who are their writing teachers are in an ideal position to assure them that they will.

Notes

[1] John Daly, "Writing Apprehension and Writing Competency," The Journal of Educational Research, 72 (Sept./Oct. 1978), 10-14; and Lester Faigley, John A. Daly, and Stephen P. Witte, "The Role of Writing Apprehension in Writing Performance and Competency," The Journal of Educational Research, 75 (Sept./Oct. 1981), 16-21, are two articles which make this suggestion. As Donna Gorrell writes in "Writing Apprehension: Combating Fear of Failure," in Remedial English, Dorothy Matthews, ed.,(Urbana: Ill. Association of Teachers of English, 1980), ERIC ED 179 973, "Daly does not refer to the apprehensive individual as a basic writer, but his descriptions imply that the two constructs are characteristically the same"(p. 12).

[2] Lynn Bloom, "The Composing Processes of Anxious and Non-anxious Writers: A Naturalistic Study," paper presented at CCCC, March 1980, Washington, D.C., ERIC ED 185 559, says that "For individuals, sums of the scores are themselves insufficient as predictors if they fall much below 75" (p.4).

[3] In Daly and Miller's original study, "The Empirical Development of an Instrument to Measure Writing Apprehension," RTE, 9 (1975), 242-248, for example, the group mean was 79.28 with a standard deviation of 18.86 (p. 246).

[4] John A. Daly and Joy Lynn Hailey, "Putting the Situation into Writing Research: Situational Parameters of Writing Apprehension," in New Directions in Composition Research, Richard Beach and Lillian Bridwell, eds., (New York: Guilford Press, 1984), pp. 259-260.

[5] Judith Berman Brandenburg, "The Needs of Women Returning to School," Personnel and Guidance Journal, 53 (Sept. 1974), 11-18.

[6] James Bartell, "Child Writers and Adult Readers: The Paradox of the Composition Class," Arizona English Bulletin, 19 (Oct. 1976), 23-28, presents

a similar theory with regard to all student writers.

[7] Patricia Connors, "Some Attitudes of Returning or Older Students of Composition," CCC, 33 (Oct. 1982), p. 265.

[8] Barry Kroll, "Assessing Students' Attitudes toward Writing," English Record, 30 (Winter 1979), 6.

[9] Lynn Quitman Troyka, "Perspectives on Legacies and Literacy in the 1980s," CCC, 33 (Oct. 1982), 252-262.

[10] Quoted in Jerold Apps' The Adult Learner on Campus (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1981), p. 50.

[11] Lynn Z. Bloom, "The Fear of Writing," William and Mary Quarterly (Winter 1980), 25-29; and Merle O'Rourke Thompson, "Classroom Techniques for Reducing Writing Anxiety: A Study of Several Cases," paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1980. ERIC ED 131 477.

[12] Troyka, p. 254.